



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library respects the copyright and intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection. The Library holds the rights and permissions to put this material online. If you hold an active copyright to this work and would like to have your materials removed from the web please contact the USHMM Library by phone at 202-479-9717, or by email at digital_library@ushmm.org.

My name is Karl Diamond and I have been a resident of Memphis, Tennessee since my arrival in this country in March of 1949. I was born and raised in Tarnow, a city 40 miles east of Krakow, Poland. My parent's names were Fatel and Matla Diamant and I had four sisters and a younger brother. We were living comfortably in Tarnow, on Taras Street #3, in a home my parents owned. My father was known as the "pickle man", because we pickled cucumbers to supply to all the grocery stores all year around in Tarnow. All the profits from the pickle sales were distributed in helping Jews in the community less fortunate than us, as we had other incomes to support the family. We owned a grocery store in Tarnow, which my mother managed, on Krakowska Street #49. We also owned some forest land, which was lumbered once a year for income that was disbursed among savings accounts for my four sisters dowries.

My oldest sister, Rachela was a Certified Public Accountant for a large paper mill, Wesco Mill, until her marriage in 1936 to Mayer Felsen. They had one child, a little girl named Perl, born in 1938. My second sister, Serla, was studying in Vienna, Austria to be a lingerie designer. Unfortunately, her career was interrupted with the occupation of Austria in March of 1938 by the Nazis. My third sister, Alta-Ethel was studying at the University of Warsaw to become a Mathematics Professor. She also had to give up her career with the outbreak of the war, September 1, 1939. My fourth sister, Mala, was helping mother to manage the grocery store in Tarnow. I, Kiva Josef Diamant, spent one year at Raush Business College before my education was also interrupted by the occupation of our city by the Nazis. My younger brother, Avrom Yitzchok, was in a Hebrew School studying to be a Talmudic scholar.

The forest land which I mentioned, was owned by my father and his brother, Wolf Diamant. It was 96.4 hectars (approximately 240 acres) in Stempina near Frysztak (Powiat Strzyzow). The forest became nationalized during the war by the communist Polish Government. As the only survivor from the entire family, I have tried unsuccessfully through different lawyers in Krakow, Memphis and Israel to regain possession or compensation for the forest in Stempina. But even now the Polish Government rejects the appeals, because I was not yet an American citizen in March of 1944 when the forest was nationalized. The only compensation I received was from the city government in Tarnow for the house on Taras Street #3, and that did not include anything for our family's possessions.

On June 12, 1942, under the pretext of resettlement, the S/S took both my parents and my brother, never to be seen or heard from again. We later learned that on June 11, 12, and 13 over 12,000 Jews from Tarnow were shipped to Belzec for extermination and over 3,000 were executed at the Jewish Cemetery in Tarnow. Three days later, the rest of the family was forced into the ghetto. At the end of August, we saw the Germans setting up their machine guns outside the ghetto and were suspicious of what was to come. My sister, Rachela Felsen, and her daughter, 3 1/2 year old Perl, decided to go into hiding. She left the ghetto on a pass each day to work at the Schamrot Company on Targowa Street, where she was employed as a C.P.A. by its Jewish owners. On August 30th, she put Perl in a knapsack and snuck her into work with her where they had built a well concealed bunker for this purpose. On September 2, 1942 Herman Blacher, the Gestapo Chief was tipped off about the hiding place; he forced them out of hiding and executed all six of them in the courtyard outside the building - my sister and her daughter, as well as, Mr. & Mrs. Schamrot and their daughter and son-in-law.

Rachela's husband, Mayer Felsen had not been heard from since 1941, where he was in a P.O.W. Camp in Yaroslavsk near Moscow when the Russians were still allied with the Germans.

In October of 1942, Ghetto-A and Ghetto-B in Tarnow were liquidated, me and two of my sisters, Alta-Ethel and Mala, were shipped off to Plaszow Concentration Camp. My other sister, Serla, disappeared without a trace. My sisters in Plaszow were assigned to work at the Madritch Uniform Plant and I was in the Bau-Commando assigned to build the barracks in Plaszow. When that work was completed I was assigned to the cabinet shop. I spent over two years in Plaszow and have many stories I could tell of my experiences.

In the summer of 1943, while working in the cabinet shop on the night shift, Amon Goeth, the Camp Commandant, appeared in the middle of the night with six S/S men and about twenty Ukrainian S/S men. He announced that the night shift was being eliminated. They made all fifty of us line up - ten rows, five deep - and the lights and machines were all shut off except for two bare bulbs hanging over the group. Two Ukrainians remained to guard us while Goeth and the others went to round up more work crews for elimination. After being in Plaszow almost a year now, I knew exactly what was to come - a march to the "Chujowa-Gorka" and execution. While I was standing with my back to the wall I quietly picked up a floor board with my foot and slipped under the floor. I knew what was beneath me because that is where the transmission belts were and also where we swept the sawdust at the end of the shift. I replaced the floorboard, buried myself in the sawdust and quietly waited. The S/S returned after an hour and marched the group off without me. It didn't take long before I heard the machine guns popping. That night I crawled out of hiding and was chased out of the cabinet shop by Kapo Kardish. I was too scared to go back to my bunk in case they came looking for me, so I spent the night underneath the barracks.

The next morning on the "Appelplatz" where we were counted each day, I slipped into the "Straff Commando Steinbruch" out of desperation. It was a punishment work force carrying rocks to build the roads within the camp. After about three weeks a new plant was completed with modern lathe machines and announcements were made in the barracks for anybody with woodworking experience to report. It was another lucky break because I would not have lasted another week in the "Steinbruch Commando". In the new plant I was put to work making wooden handles for spades, axes, and post-hole diggers.

I worked there for seven or eight months under the command of a cruel and sadistic S/S "Untersturmfuhrer". He used to drop in late in the afternoon looking for someone who didn't make quota just so he could have another victim to beat. One day he checked the product of my machine. He pulled out one of the handles, said that it was crooked, and hit me with a wooden plank over my head and shoulders until my skin split open and I was covered with blood. He said "Wen das noch einmahl passiert du wirst auf dem Haufen gehn" (If it happens one more time you will be executed and thrown on the Pile) and he walked away without looking back, as he always did.

The Kapo in this plant took sympathy with me, as he too had been beaten by the "Untersturmfuhrer" in the past. He took some rags used to clean the machines and helped me stop the bleeding. It took a while, but I did heal. I eventually even forgot about the incident until eleven years later when my wife noticed a lump getting larger and larger on my left shoulder. We were worried that it might be cancer, but the doctor who examined me thought it was more likely a foreign object embedded in my shoulder. What he removed was a wooden splinter from that beating - four inches long and one-half inch thick - a souvenir from Plaszow.

In the summer of 1944, when the Russian Army was less than 200 kilometers away, the Germans started to evacuate the camp. First they shipped out the Madritch Uniform Plant employees, where my two sisters worked. This was the last time I saw them, as they waved good-bye to me. The rumors were that they were sent to Auschwitz or Studthoff.

In November of 1944, I was sent with a group of 1500 men to Gross Rosen. This was pure hell. Conditions were deplorable and it seemed like the only function of this camp was to

torture us until our spirits were broken. We were hosed with cold water and made to stay naked in the freezing weather of November for over twenty-four hours. When we were issued clothing by the Kapos it was intentionally the wrong size (they would delight in how ridiculous we looked). We had to crawl on our knees every day for our food. We were made to do impossible physical labor with absolutely no productive purpose. We had to carry telephone poles up the mountain and rocks down the mountain and then the next day we had to carry the same rocks back up the mountain and the poles down. If you stumbled or collapsed you did not come down the mountain alive. Death was a relief to many from this inhumane place.

After three weeks I was lucky enough to be in the right place when five S/S trucks came to pick up 150 men. We didn't care where they took us as long as it was out of this hell. Our destination was Langenbielau - where there was not enough food but plenty of lice. We were assigned to "Lehman-Flugzeug-Geretenbau" to make airplane parts.

On May 9, 1945 we were liberated by the Russian Army. Actually it was a single female Russian soldier riding a bicycle on the bare rims. She sprayed the electric fence with her machine gun, kicked it open with her boot and told us we were free. The rest of the soldiers came in trucks three or four hours later bringing us food and clothes and treating us very well. The soldiers were breaking into the abandoned German homes and encouraged us to take whatever we needed. Transportation was arranged for us to return to our places of origin and we were given Russian stamped I.D. cards. These cards were useful in Poland for travel and lodging because the Polish people after the war were more Anti-Semitic than ever and seemed disappointed some Jews had survived.

The only reason we were accommodated was because the Poles were afraid of the Russians. The biggest shock in returning to Tarnow was to discover that I was the only survivor from my entire family. I registered as survivor number 293. That night I took shelter with the baker, Mr. Fisher, another survivor who's name appeared on the list. He told me of a Jewish family who had just returned after the war from Russia and tried to reclaim their home; they were murdered by the Poles.

The only advice from the "Judenrat" in Tarnow was to leave. Aside from the dangers of remaining in Anti-Semitic Poland, I was not yet willing to give up on finding someone from the family. I traveled in Europe for six months searching the Displaced Persons Camps. Finally in March of 1944, while visiting a camp in Eggenfelden, Bavaria, I received a message from the Red Cross that my two Aunts who lived in New York were looking for family members. Through the JOINT and the Red Cross I discovered a first cousin of mine (my Aunt's son) was in the American Army stationed in Bamberg. I traveled to Bamberg in the American Occupied Zone and met my cousin, Albert Felix, for the first time. He encouraged me to accept reality, forget the horrors of the past and try to start a new life. He helped me to get a job with the U.N.R.R.A. in Bamberg and it was in this capacity I met my future wife, Ruth Mam. She was from Bialystok, Poland and was also a survivor (liberated from Bergen-Belsen). We married in 1948 and have four wonderful children.

My oldest daughter, Marcia Diamond, is married and lives in Arlington, VA with her husband and two children. She and her husband are both attorneys for the Federal Government. Our second daughter, Sharon Charlop, is a professional match-maker living in Israel with her husband (a Rabbi) and her two children. Only my youngest daughter, Madelyn Gordon, lives in Memphis with her husband (a mechanical engineer). She works for a Synagogue and they are expecting their first child. My youngest child, Freddie Diamond, is still single. He earned his PhD from Princeton University at the age of 23 and is a mathematics professor (like my sister, Alta-Ethel). He has taught at Ohio State, Boston University, Columbia University, and Princeton Institute for International Studies. He has recently accepted a position with Cambridge University and will be moving to England.